

VZCZCXRO5451
OO RUEHBI
DE RUEHLM #0495/01 0881041
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
O 291041Z MAR 06
FM AMEMBASSY COLOMBO
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC IMMEDIATE 2943
INFO RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI PRIORITY 9427
RUEHKA/AMEMBASSY DHAKA PRIORITY 9052
RUEHKT/AMEMBASSY KATHMANDU PRIORITY 3977
RUEHIL/AMEMBASSY ISLAMABAD PRIORITY 5941
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON PRIORITY 2913
RUEHBI/AMCONSUL MUMBAI PRIORITY 4420
RUEHCG/AMCONSUL CHENNAI PRIORITY 6487
RHEHNSC/NSC WASHDC PRIORITY
RUEKDIA/DIA WASHDC PRIORITY
RHHMUNA/HQ USPACOM HONOLULU HI PRIORITY

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 COLOMBO 000495

SIPDIS

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/27/2016

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [CE](#)

SUBJECT: SRI LANKA: JVP GIVING ALL IT'S GOT IN SOUTHERN
CAMPAIGNING FOR LOCAL ELECTIONS

REF: A. COLOMBO 460

[B](#). COLOMBO 400

[C](#). COLOMBO 382

Classified By: DCM JAMES F. ENTWISTLE. REASON: 1.4 (B,D).

SUMMARY

[1](#)1. (C) Poloff's March 26-27 visit to four southern districts suggested a sharp split in attitudes--if not in actual platforms--among the three largest parties in the run-up to March 30 local elections. The governing Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) is banking on traditional voter preferences for the ruling party to win it control of most local bodies; the opposition United National Party (UNP) seems demoralized and already resigned to losing many of the local councils it now controls; and the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) is giving all it's got in a well-orchestrated push to prove its popularity in the predominantly Sinhalese Buddhist south. While history (since 1978 the governing party has always prevailed at local elections) and President Rajapaksa's own southern roots augur well for an SLFP victory in the south this time, the JVP can be counted on to portray any gains it makes as proof of its burgeoning strength. End summary.

SOUTHERN COLOR SCHEME:
REDS ALL-OUT AND ALL OVER;
BLUES BLASE'; GREENS GOING
THROUGH THE MOTIONS; YELLOWS A NO-SHOW

[1](#)2. (SBU) In a March 26-27 visit to four southern districts, poloff and POL FSN met with local party organizers, business leaders and poll monitors to assess preparations for local elections on March 30. (Note: Polls for 22 local bodies across the nation, including the Colombo and Galle Municipal Councils, have been postponed indefinitely because of various legal challenges to some nomination lists. In addition, local elections in all districts in the north and in the eastern district of Batticaloa have been postponed until September 30. End note.) At present, the opposition United National Party (UNP) controls 95 percent of all local bodies (thanks to its victory in the 2001 general elections just before the 2002 local elections). The governing Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) controls just four (out of a total 314)

local bodies, while the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP) controls only one--a "pradeshiya sabha," or village council, in Tissamaharama in the southern district of Hambantota. In the four districts visited (Galle, Matara, Hambantota and Ratnapura), seats are being contested by the three largest parties and, for the first time, the Buddhist nationalist Jathika Hela Urumaya (JHU) and, in Ratnapura, the Ceylon Workers Congress (CWC).

13. (SBU) All along the main coastal road south from Colombo to Hambantota campaign posters, party offices and even occasional rallies and parades sponsored by all three of the largest parties were evident, but red JVP streamers, banners, flags and monumental papier-mache reproductions of the JVP party symbol--the bell--clearly predominated in the landscape. On March 27, the last day permitted for campaigning before elections take place, the Embassy team witnessed a total of 11 campaign rallies--eight of them a sea of JVP red, two blue-bannered for the SLFP and one lone four-vehicle green-bedecked caravan for an admirably persistent UNP candidate. (Except for one sighting of about six party workers sporting baseball caps in JHU yellow, the monk-based party was nowhere in evidence in the predominantly Sinhalese Buddhist southern heartland. Efforts to visit JHU's Ratnapura office were unsuccessful.) Even along comparatively desolate stretches of road, red JVP flags were omnipresent--tacked on to trees, utility poles or any convenient structure.

POSTERS VS. PATRONAGE:
IS SLFP TOO COMPLACENT?

COLOMBO 00000495 002 OF 004

14. (SBU) Most sources contacted during the trip, while acknowledging that the JVP was undoubtedly working harder than any other party, cited the inevitable "pull" traditionally wielded by the governing party as a near-insurmountable obstacle for the reds. (Note: Since the Constitution was amended in 1978, the victorious party in the most recent national election has typically won a resounding majority in subsequent local elections. End note.) In local elections, most contacts agreed, patronage, rather than platform, matters, and the party deemed likeliest to prevail on the central government to get garbage collected or playgrounds constructed is the likeliest to get elected. In a March 27 meeting, Gamini Abeynayake, an erstwhile JVP supporter now running as an SLFP candidate for a local council in Galle, justified his cross-over to poloff in simple (and irrefutably logical) terms: "If a village has to be developed, the party in power can do it." Local SLFP organizer Chandima Weerakkody seconded this view, pointing out that only after Abeynayake's decision to cross over had a long-blocked irrigation channel in his village finally been cleared--through the magic of SLFP intervention and support. In a separate meeting later the same day, Buddhika Pathirana, UNP organizer for Matara District, sounded a similar note, observing that since "everyone is trying to get benefits from the government," the party that is actually running the government stands the best chance of attracting votes. He added that the biggest obstacle to the UNP winning at the local level is rural voters' fears that their welfare, or "Samurdhi," benefits might be cut if they vote with the opposition.

15. (SBU) The "vote-with-the-government" bandwagon may be strongest in President Mahinda Rajapaksa's home district of Hambantota. In a March 28 meeting, local business and community leaders (including at least two long-time UNP supporters) told poloff that they expected voters, hopeful of presidential largesse for his birthplace, to turn out en masse for the SLFP. Even those severely affected by the tsunami are unlikely to hold the Government's perceived

SIPDIS

slowness in providing reconstruction assistance against the SLFP, these Hambantota residents indicated. "Now that Rajapaksa is president, he ought to be able to do more," reasoned one local businessman, who lost his wife and his in-laws in the disaster. Hambantota Chamber of Commerce Director Azmi Thassim later explained, "People see the President as a 12-year man" (i.e., likely to remain President for two six-year terms). Since local elections do not involve a change of national government or any "big ideologies or policies," voters make their decisions based on whom they believe is best positioned--usually via membership in the ruling party--to get things done.

FOR THE JVP, ANY INCREASE IS GRAVY

¶6. (C) Despite the SLFP's built-in advantage, many interlocutors speculated that JVP diligence would pay off in substantially increased membership in local councils in many areas outside the north and east. Moreover, since the JVP has been publicly reticent about its electoral targets, it can claim any increase of its current modest total (214 members out of a possible 4,000 in various local bodies across the island and control of one local council out of over 400) as a victory. And since any increase in JVP numbers is likely to come at the expense of the SLFP (which competes for essentially the same vote bank as the reds), the JVP can cite anything other than a complete clean sweep for the incumbents as proof of popular dissatisfaction with the ruling party. For the JVP (which technically is neither in the opposition nor in the governing coalition), local elections are win-win--and the JVP is definitely playing to win as much as it can. SLFP interlocutors complained that JVP candidates depict themselves as "with the government"--and thus able to deliver critical patronage at the local level--while distancing themselves from the blues when convenient. The JVP "takes credit for every good thing the government does" while simultaneously criticizing it for perceived lapses, one grumbled.

¶7. (C) Samson Abeykoon, a prominent Hambantota businessman,

COLOMBO 00000495 003 OF 004

lamented that the SLFP and UNP "only get ready with propaganda at election time," while the JVP's propaganda machine, on the other hand, is never idle. For example, immediately after the August 12 assassination of Foreign Minister and eminent SLFP MP Lakshman Kadirgamar, the JVP beat the SLFP to the propaganda punch, printing and distributing a visually gripping poster eulogizing the late statesman and castigating the insurgent Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) for the murder, he noted. The JVP thus managed to position itself as the pro-national security/anti-terrorism party before the SLFP could even react to its own member's killing, he said. Moreover, the JVP has worked carefully over the past few years to make the one local council it controls in Tissamaharama a "model" of rural development, Abeykoon observed. "They did a lot of work there," he conceded. Since Tissamaharama is also a holy site popular with Sinhalese Buddhist pilgrims from all over the island, the JVP was able to showcase the positive results of its governance to an even wider audience, he added. Other sources in Hambantota reported that the JVP, which is usually tagged as a Sinhalese nationalist party, had fielded two Tamil-speaking candidates (presumably from the sizable Muslim community) for local polls in the district.

JVP: BRAND LOYALTY KEY

¶8. (C) SLFP and UNP representatives in the south conceded that the JVP was campaigning longer and stronger than either

of them (although both maintained that their more individualized, house-to-house style of campaigning was more effective than the large public rallies the JVP favors). All interlocutors also noted that the JVP campaign strategy, which focuses on attracting votes for the party, rather than for an individual candidate, will inevitably end up netting votes for the reds (Reftels). (Note: Each party submits a slate of candidates for each local body, for whom voters may cast a total of three preference votes. Since a voter may assign all three votes to the same candidate, candidates from the same party are, in some senses, running against each other. This quirk in the electoral system typically makes SLFP and UNP candidates unwilling to pool resources or work together on a campaign in the same constituency. End note.) UNP and SLFP campaign literature, posters and rallies are always specifically targeted to an individual candidate--with that candidate's image and ballot number, rather than the party symbol, prominently featured. JVP "propaganda," on the other hand, is uniform across all districts, its depictions limited to only the party name, color and electoral symbol of the bell. Names and pictures of individual candidates are almost never displayed; indeed, the JVP has not even identified a mayoral candidate for the highly-coveted Colombo Municipal Council.

19. (C) Some interlocutors cautioned against confusing the JVP's efficient use of propaganda as a measure of its popular support. One Hambantota businessman commented on the JVP's penchant for blanketing a stretch of road with "many elaborate decorations to give the impression to outsiders that the whole area is theirs." The JVP is spending too much money on propaganda, asserted the SLFP's Weerakkody, who speculated that local reds were funding their costly campaign by extorting money from quarries in the area. But in a March 27 meeting in Hambantota, JVP Area Leader Niroshana Perera expressed confidence that his party's campaigning would pay off and, Rajapaksa's local roots notwithstanding, the party would make a strong showing in the district on election day. Perera claimed that 90 percent of local teachers were backing the JVP, and that support among job-seeking youth was similarly high. Nor was the JVP confining itself to large rallies, he emphasized; party cadres had already visited all the homes in the area from Tissamaharama to Tangalle four times in house-to-house canvassing. Preparing for a massive motorcycle-and-trishaw rally later in the day, he complained that SLFP thugs were attempting to intimidate his party workers, asserting that one had had his motorcycle torched in a set-to just the night before.

UNP: UNENTHUSIASTIC?

COLOMBO 00000495 004 OF 004

10. (C) UNP interlocutors in the area, while making a brave show of campaigning, seemed more or less resigned to an inevitable loss of most of the local councils the party now controls. Matara organizer Pathirana acknowledged that party morale is in a slump, dispirited by the SLFP's victory at presidential polls just four months ago, as well as the greens' loss in general elections in 2004. He added that UNP leader Ranil Wickremesinghe's address at a local rally on March 19 brought out only 650 supporters, compared with the 8,000 who turned out to hear him during the presidential election. The SLFP government's failure so far to provide for all of the tsunami-affected in Matara has not been a factor in the elections, Pathirana lamented; instead, people seem to be hoping that an SLFP local government will do what the SLFP central government so far has not. UNP MP for Ratnapura Thalatha Jayasinghe told a similar story of tepid public response to Wickremesinghe's appearance at a recent rally in her electorate. She gloomily predicted an anemic overall turnout on election day--perhaps no more than 40 percent. While both Pathirana and Jayasinghe believe the JVP decision to contest separately from the SLFP may marginally

benefit the UNP, neither suggested the boost would be enough to make a real difference in their areas. (Note: Moreover, in Ratnapura any such benefit will likely be canceled out by the fact that the Ceylon Workers Congress, which usually contests with the UNP, is going it alone this time as well.)

COMMENT

¶11. (C) The March 30 elections provide the JVP its first real chance since local polls in 2002 to gauge its popular appeal as an independent party distinct from the SLFP, rather than as a junior member of a coalition dominated by "Big Blue." While the one-time Marxist insurgents know they cannot dislodge the SLFP, riding on its victory at the presidential polls just a few months ago, from first place, they can be counted on to portray any increase, no matter how slight, over the JVP's modest showing at the last local poll as a victory against the two main parties. For the SLFP, this can only spell trouble, as the reds can be expected to use these gains as proof that the people are with them--and that they endorse the JVP's comparatively hard line on the peace process. (This will be especially true if the SLFP, which competes for essentially the same voter base as the JVP, fails to leverage its presidential victory into control of at least 80 percent of the local councils.)

¶12. (C) Comment (cont.): While the JVP is campaigning its heart out, the SLFP and UNP, at least in the four districts visited, seem to be relying on historical patterns, which have awarded the ruling party almost all local councils, to determine electoral outcomes. The SLFP regards these elections as a "gimme"--the ruling party's rightful and inevitable piece of the pie--a view the demoralized UNP seems to share. While there is little reason to doubt that history will repeat itself this time around, the SLFP may be just a little too complacent and the UNP a little too apathetic than is prudent. Since converting from Marxist revolutionaries to mainstream politicians in 1994, the JVP has continued to make incremental, if modest, gains in successive elections at the local, provincial and national levels. There is no reason to suppose this time will be any different. The JVP doesn't expect to be the second largest party this year or next year or even the year after that. But they are clearly planning to take on that role sometime--perhaps sooner than their inattentive rivals realize. Even if the JVP wins control of only a few more local councils, it will use that opportunity to boost its visibility, strengthen its grass-roots network and get its message out--while the two largest parties appear to be asleep at the switch.

LUNSTEAD